

# **Jean-Paul Sartre: Chief Prophet of the Existentialists**

## **John L. Brown**

By midafternoon every day the offices of Modern Times (Les Temps Modernes), the Existentialist monthly on the rue Sébastien-Bottin, start filling up. There are students from the Sorbonne, wearing full beards and threadbare overcoats; literary ladies who bring along their knitting; a sprinkling of notorious Left Bank dead beats, bent on borrowing a few hundred francs; journalists looking for interviews; visitors from abroad, speaking French with a variety of accents—Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, Balkan.

They all want to see M. Sartre.

By 5 there is not an empty chair in the place. Even the tables are occupied. The air is heavy with smoke, buzzing with intellectual discussion. Around 5:30 or 6, a short, hatless figure—beginning to grow bald, a man pale, blondish, blinking behind hornrimmed glasses—slips into the room. The conversation halts for a moment, everyone rushes over to greet the newcomer and tries to catch his eye or ear. It is Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialist-in-Chief. Five years ago he taught philosophy in a Paris lycée. Today he is the most discussed intellectual and literary man in France.

Sartre's glance is sharp, analytical, responsive. He is bundled up in a coat acquired during his lecture tour in the United States and in an enormous knitted scarf of a type that is a uniform along the Boul' Mich'. His coat pockets bulge with papers. As he talks, rapidly and well, he gestures with his pipe. Since he became an international celebrity, equally known for his philosophical writings, his plays and his novels, he is bombarded with all sorts of requests.

In the midst of the hubbub he has retained a vaguely professorial manner, good humor, a willingness to listen and a rare accessibility. In the office Sartre takes time to shake hands with his friend — fresh, handsome Simone de Beauvoir—like himself a philosopher-novelist. She is preparing to leave on a lecture tour of the United States. With her is Michel Leiris, poet and anthropologist, who came to Existentialism by way of Surrealism.

About 7:30 Sartre and his friends adjourn to the near-by bar of the Hotel Pont-Royal. Notes are taken, manuscripts scrutinized. An enormous amount of handshaking goes on—for in this most literary of Parisian bars, everyone knows (or would like to give the impression of knowing) everybody else.

Sartre, with a drink before him, can calmly proceed to the correction of an article, apparently undisturbed by the buzzing about him. This faculty comes from long practice. Sartre's life has been that of the unattached intellectual of the Left Bank, a life divided between the hotel room where he sleeps and the cafe table where he reads, writes, drinks, receives his friends. It is a classic pattern that permits almost complete intellectual liberty and detachment and affords a freedom from social and family obligations that is rarely possible elsewhere. It has left an indelible mark on the life and productions of Sartre. His philosophical career began at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, behind the Pantheon, which has the reputation of being one of the "toughest" schools in France. There he prepared to take the competitive state examination, the "agregation" required for all those who wish to teach in the lycées. The majority of the candidates fail. Sartre took first place in the aggregation in philosophy in 1929. Simone de Beauvoir was second. He was immediately appointed professor of philosophy in the lycée at Le Havre. He remained for several years, reading prodigiously, laying the foundations for future philosophical and literary works, studying the German philosophers like Husserl and Heidegger (then almost completely unknown in France).

He didn't like Le Havre. He wanted to get back to Paris. By the mid-Thirties he was teaching at the Lycée Condorcet, near the Gare Saint-Lazare. He happily resumed his existence as an unattached intellectual of the Latin Quarter. His teaching duties were not heavy, he had time for reading and writing, for discussions with friends. He lived in a small hotel on the rue de Seine, one of the most picturesque of Paris streets, filled with book stores, antique shops and art galleries. A few years hence this rundown, unpretentious Hotel Louisiana may be marked with an official plaque designating it as "the cradle of French Existentialism."

From the rue de Seine to the cafes of Saint-Germain-des-Pres is only a step. In French literary history of the twentieth century, the cafe has the same importance as the salon in the eighteenth. The Deux Magots, Lipp's and the Flore serve as library, study, open forum, reception room for the "men of letters" of the neighborhood. Any number of "isms" have been born on their terrasses in the past three generations. Indeed, the Latin Quarter cafe is as sacred a thing as an English club. Chosen after deep reflection, it demands undivided fidelity. Sartre and his friends chose the Flore, just beside the Deux Magots, as their headquarters. He could be found there at almost any hour of the day or night, writing away at his table in the rear.

Sartre was seriously scholarly; but his life did not resemble that of the learned recluse or the retiring professor. He was the type of professor that would have disturbed boards of education. For he haunted the night clubs of Montmartre and Montparnasse; he studied not only the German Existentialists but also the curious forms of life that exist on the fringes of intellectual and artistic Paris—prostitutes, amateur and professional, pederasts, barmen, bums, traffickers in "coco." They all appear in the pages of his novel, 'The Age of Reason.'

"The Age of Reason"—like Simone de Beauvoir's "The Invited" (L'Invitee)—might almost be regarded as a *roman a clef*. It is said to be freely inspired by the activities of that eccentric group known to connoisseurs of social phenomena of the quartier Saint-Germain-des-Pres as "the band of the Hotel Louisiana." Sartre and his disciples lived at the Louisiana together, shared ideas, money, emotions and mistresses. Summers they sunbathed en slip on the roof, while listening to American jazz records. Winters they danced at the bal negre, did the night clubs, dreamed of writing novels that would rival Faulkner and Caldwell in violence. Sartre himself did an essay about Faulkner for the Nouvelle Revue Franchise in 1938. His admiration for American novelists—especially Dos Passos, Faulkner and Caldwell—is clear from the tone and technique of his own fiction.

It was the heroic, Bohemian period of Existentialism. No compromise with convention was permitted. Simone de Beauvoir circulated in an original costume, half Alpine, half Boul' Mich'—heavy hiking shoes, rolled wool stockings, a scarf tied about her head. Sartre roamed the neighborhood chewing his pipe, clad in an ancient sheepskin.

But that was quite a while ago. Sartre is now a pontiff, Simone de Beauvoir a well-groomed literary lady who has abandoned hand-knitted hose for the sheerest of nylons. And the wild and unconsidered teen-agers of the band of the Louisiana win literary prizes and movie contracts.

Now that they are respectable and well heeled, the old defiance and desperation are going out of them. Steam heat and modern plumbing have lured them away from the cold and not very clean Louisiana. The age of scandal is over, they are making their peace with society, and who knows but that Sartre may end up in the French Academy and Simone de Beauvoir in the College de France?

But it was during the disordered and faintly disreputable period of the Louisiana that both of them were composing the books that have made their reputation. Sartre, in addition to his purely philosophical works, was beginning to write, in the mid-Thirties, fiction which "illustrated" his abstract ideas. His collection of short stories, "The Wall," made something of a stir when it appeared. Even more remarkable was his first novel (if novel it can be called) entitled "Nausea."

When the war broke out, Sartre was mobilized as a private. He was taken prisoner, spent several months in a PW camp, was released, returned to the Paris of the Occupation. He took up his old round of life, returned to the Louisiana, went back to his old table at the Flore. In avant garde circles people began to discuss Existentialism, and the publication in 1943 of Sartre's principal theoretical work, "Being and Nothingness" (L'Etre et le Neant)—720 dense, often confused pages—consecrated him as a "serious thinker."

It was dedicated to "Castor," the name by which Simone de Beauvoir was known in the band of the Louisiana. Although much talked about, it remains largely unread even by his admirers, who prefer his novels and his plays. Reviewers, intimidated by its bulk and its professional jargon, passed it over in silence. Some scholars tend to discount its importance, rating it as a French adaptation of Heidegger's "Being and Time" (Sein und Zeit) rather than as a deeply original contribution.

Ever since "The Wall" and "Nausea," discerning critics had singled out Sartre as the most promising newcomer in the Gallimard publishing stable. But his name did not become known to the general public until the production of his play on the Orestes theme, "The Flies" (1943), which, under its mythological trappings, was an eloquent appeal for human liberty. At the same time he was collaborating with clandestine papers like *Les Lettres Francaises* and *Combat*. One of the best accounts of the liberation of Paris is Sartre's reportage in the first "overground" numbers of *Combat*. Another of his plays, a one-acter, "No Exit," was presented at the Vieux Colombier during the war. It is still running there. In New York, on the other hand, "No Exit," while praised by the critics, ran for only a matter of weeks.

In Paris, by 1944, Existentialism had ceased to be the property of a few philosophers and literary men and became a public possession, the theme for sermons on the evil of our times, a subject of popular controversy. Lectures by Sartre occasioned fistcuff and the intervention of the police. Everyone talked about Existentialism, but very few had any notion what it was.

Even today, the number of those who can define Existentialism are few compared with those who talk about it. Existentialism is a vision of a man as a stranger in the universe—a stranger to himself and to others. The Sartre brand of Existentialist is an atheist who sees man as helpless, flung without knowing how or why into a world he cannot understand, endowed with liberty ("Man is liberty," says Sartre flatly) which he may betray but which he cannot deny, to make his way as best he can in fear and trembling, in uncertainty and anguish.

"Anguish," which to Sartre is interchangeable with "nausea," is a key word in the Existentialist vocabulary. Much emphasized, too, is the belief that man cannot achieve an objective, certain understanding of this world he never made. Thus "Existentialist man" asserts that there is no general philosophic system which can explain the universe and no such thing as human nature, "since there is no God to conceive it a priori." Existentialism holds that the problem of "What is man?" can only be approached subjectively, and that each man defines himself in action.

Sartre does not claim that Existentialism sprang full-born from him. On the contrary, all good Existentialists point to ancestors. They note that Socrates employed a subjective approach to the question of human existence in distinction to the formalized methods of the Sophists. They note

that the seventeenth-century Frenchman Blaise Pascal questioned the reality of philosophic systems.

In the "Pensees," Pascal set down a passage that sounds like good Existentialist doctrine: "When I consider the brief span of my life, swallowed up in eternity past and to come, the little space that I occupy, lost in the immensity of space of which I know nothing and which knows nothing of me, I am terrified and I am astonished that I am here rather than there, that I am now rather than then. By whose order and by whose action have this place and this time been destined for me? Everyone has at some time shared this anguish. But he usually succeeds in stifling it in business, or pleasure, or the daily routine."

The real genealogy of Existentialism, however, begins with the nineteenth rather than the seventeenth century, and with a mystical Danish pastor, Soren Kierkegaard, rather than with the French Pascal. Kierkegaard could not accept the rational abstractions of a philosopher like Hegel. To Hegel's objective and systematic logic Kierkegaard opposed a vision of the human condition as essentially tragic and lonely, of the world as absurd, of reason as weak and fallible.

Where Sartre and his followers break with Kierkegaard—and, for that matter, with Pascal—is over the question of Christianity. Pascal, believing in salvation, spoke of "the wretchedness of man without God." Kierkegaard passionately insisted: "Christianity came into the world as an absolute and not, as human reason would like to imagine, as a consolation."

The atheistic Existentialists rejected Kierkegaard's belief in God but accepted his conception of life as disorder. In Nietzsche they found another master. The German philosopher's apocalyptic sense of desolation and despair fitted in very well with their vision of the world and experience.

Today, as Sartre pointed out in a pamphlet written in 1945, "there are two kinds of Existentialists. The first are Christians, and among them we may situate Jaspers [Karl Jaspers, professor of philosophy at Heidelberg] and Gabriel Marcel [Parisian playwright and composer]. The others, atheistic Existentialists, such as Heidegger [Martin Heidegger, who made his reputation as a professor of philosophy at Freiburg] and myself. Both groups believe that existence precedes essence or, if you wish, that you have to start with subjectivity."

From the moment that Existentialism won popular attention it was attacked from both the Left and the Right. Communists found Existentialism the expression of a decadent bourgeois culture, the philosophy of a hopeless, unhealthy world.

Conservative Christians attacked Sartre's brand of Existentialism because of its uncompromising atheism, its denial of transcendent values, its obsession with perversion, and moral and physical ugliness. Clerics called his doctrines "materialistic."

Sartre denies that his philosophy is one of blank despair. He maintains that Existentialism inspires man to positive action, in giving him the full measure of his liberty and in refusing to permit refuge in false security. Sartre's thought, however representative it may be of shattered post-war Europe, by no means constitutes a closed and finished whole. It is in constant development and consequently full of contradictions. At the heart of his thought is the concept of man as liberty, man who has full freedom to create himself and his values as he wills. Yet simultaneously he insists on total responsibility, total "engagement," which automatically curtails this liberty.

Sartre's spiritual drama is by no means yet played out. He is just over 40, in vigorous production, and it will be interesting to see how he will resolve this contradiction between total engagement and total liberty, between positive action and the nonexistence of positive values. Is human life possible in a world of unrelieved nausea? Is man capable of hope and action in a world of despair?

As Sartre develops, as he continues to live and write, he seems to be moving away from the sterile nihilism of Heidegger. He has interested himself deeply in the problems of our time, insists that the artist and the writer must commit themselves, that they cannot hope to remain neutral.

His trip to the United States in 1945 had immediate repercussions in his work. On his return he wrote "The Deferential Prostitute," now playing on the same bill at the Theatre Antoine with his drama about the French Resistance, "The Unburied Dead." "The Deferential Prostitute," an examination of the race question in America, has aroused a good deal of controversy.

He has also devoted a special number of *Modern Times* to the United States. "In America," he notes, "the myth of liberty coexists with a dictatorship of public opinion; the myth of economic liberalism with monster corporations which embrace a continent, which finally belong to no one, where everyone works from top to bottom, like employees in a nationalized industry. The respect for science, for industry, for positivism and a fanatical delight in the gadget go hand-in-hand with the grim humor of *The New Yorker*, which makes bitter fun of a mechanical civilization and of the 100 million Americans who try to satisfy their need for the marvelous by reading the incredible adventures of Superman or Mandrake the Magician. \* \* \* Nowhere else in the world does there exist such a contrast between men and myths, between real life and the collective representation of it."

Unlike many Frenchmen who have visited America, Sartre does not find that the United States is capable of offering a solution to Europe's problems. Nor does he see a solution in Russia. Sartre feels that the new synthesis capable of restoring war-shattered Europe has not yet manifested

**Source:** From the *New York Times Magazine*, February 2, 1947, taken from Seligman, Ben B., *Molders of Modern Thought*, Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1970, pp. 117-125